

## A Public Art strategy for Reading

### Introduction

Reading Borough Council has been engaged and active in commissioning public art for the past 15 years, both through its own development schemes and in partnership with other developers. The Council has taken an innovative approach to commissioning, from 1991 when it was one of the first UK local authorities to adopt Percent for Art through to the more recent piloting of Arts Council England's "Art at the Centre" scheme.

This strategy updates Reading Borough Council's approach to public art, outlines current best practice, provides guidance to developers and other prospective commissioners on implementing this approach, and offers an opportunity to work in partnership with the Council's "Artists in the City" programme.

Part of this strategy focuses on encouraging the involvement of artists in new developments through formal Planning processes. However, the principles and good practice are equally relevant to projects which emerge through other routes. These may include communities wishing to commission new work for their neighbourhood, or commissioning an artist to commemorate a symbolic event.

### Planning context

#### Percent for Art

Reading Borough Council was one of the first UK local authorities to adopt a Percent for Art policy in 1991, and this continues to underpin the approach to securing commissions. The policy aims to encourage developers to allocate a proportion of their development costs to the commissioning of artists and states that:

"The Council will in appropriate cases encourage the provision of new works of art as part of schemes of development, and in determining an application for planning permission will have regard to the contribution made by any such works to the appearance of the scheme and to the amenities of the area."

### Reading Borough Local Plan

The current Reading Borough Local Plan includes reference to the provision of public art under Policy CUD 14 - Standards of design in development:

“Where appropriate all development, including extensions and alterations to existing buildings, will normally be required to exhibit a high standard of design and be compatible with the scale and character of the surrounding environment, and will normally be expected to ..... Consider provision of public art on site or nearby when the development is large scale, accessible to or highly visible by the public and where public art can contribute to the appearance of the development and the amenities of the surrounding area”

### Supplementary Planning Guidance

Supplementary Planning Guidance as adopted by Reading Borough Council in July 2004 states that:

“An element of the contributions towards Open Space, Sport and Recreation may be used towards improvements/enhancements, including the use of art, to upgrade public amenity spaces as part of works to upgrade facilities to cater for additional population. However where public art is programmed in a particular locality, and certainly in respect of major schemes, additional contributions or provision may be sought. For major schemes developers will be encouraged to adopt the percent for art recommendation whereby approximately 1% of the total construction costs is given over to public art either as part of the proposals or in the locality of the application site.”

### Why involve artists?

- **Distinctiveness** - artists can contribute to the creation of a unique identity for a place through work that is original and site specific
- **Quality** - artists can enhance the physical quality of an environment and the experience of those using it
- **Sense of place** - artists can create a sense of place by drawing on key local references such as heritage, topography, site uses and demography
- **Engagement** - artists can involve communities and stakeholders both in the process and the outcomes of their work
- **Profile** - the involvement of artists can raise the profile of a scheme locally, nationally and internationally

### Definition - integration not decoration

Conventional definitions have listed a wide range of artforms and contexts which can be described as public art. More recent thinking sees public art not as a list of possible outcomes - however wide and varied - but as a process which involves artists in the conception, development and transformation of the public realm. This may result in outcomes normally associated with public art such as sculpture, street furniture or lighting but equally may lead to something entirely unexpected. The key difference is that from the outset the process encourages the widest possible application of the artist's imagination, creativity and interpretation. Reading has successfully piloted this approach in city centre schemes through Art at the Centre and is now ready to encourage these principles to be adopted more widely.

### From Art at the Centre to Artists in the City

Artists in the City was launched following the completion of Art at the Centre as a pilot scheme. The Artists in the City programme is run by Reading Borough Council and works in partnership with developers, community organisations and other agencies. The approach developed through Artists in the City has shown that the most successful commissions are realised when the following factors are in place:

- An artist's brief that does not prescribe the production of specific outcomes, but allows the artist to make proposals based on a period of research, consultation and development relating to the scheme, site or context as a whole
- The appointment of an artist at an early stage so that proposals can be considered and integrated before key design decisions are made
- Opportunities for the artist to collaborate, influence and be influenced by key professionals on a project team such as architects and landscape architects

We are keen to encourage developers or commissioners to adopt this approach through working in partnership with Artists in the City, and we are happy to advise on the most appropriate way forward for your development or project.



## Priorities

We welcome the involvement of artists on any project of any scale. However we will actively seek to apply this strategy on developments or contexts which meet the following criteria:

- schemes of a major scale
- schemes which have significant public access or visibility
- sites with links to Reading's heritage
- sites which signify gateways, either into Reading itself or between different areas of Reading
- schemes which include or affect identified communities

If you would like more information on implementing this strategy and working with Artists in the City please contact:

Tammy Bedford  
Arts Manager  
Reading Borough Council  
Civic Centre  
Reading RG1 7TD  
Tel: 0118 939 0394  
Email: [tammy.bedford@reading.gov.uk](mailto:tammy.bedford@reading.gov.uk)